

# **Dueling Realities for Democrats: Big Gains but Large Obstacles in 2018; Political Calculus**

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**Highlight:** This year's generally positive special elections results for Democrats are still a reminder that it will be difficult to win in G.O.P. territory next year.

## **Body**

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Correction Appended

The Democrats fared far better in this spring's special congressional elections than even the most optimistic Democrat might have guessed a few months ago. But in the end, they lost all four in Republican-held districts — including [the hotly contested election](#) in Georgia's Sixth Congressional District on Tuesday.

This contradiction is the heart of the challenge the party faces in 2018. Democrats will probably benefit from an extremely favorable political environment, as they do today. But the problem is they're going uphill, even if the wind is strongly at their backs. The 2018 midterm elections will be decided in Republican-leaning terrain. Even a wave the size of the electoral tsunamis that swept Republicans out of power in 2006 and back into it 2010 would not guarantee the Democrats a House majority in 2018.

Make no mistake: Despite the losses, these four special election results — in Kansas, Montana, Georgia and South Carolina — are very strong showings for the Democrats.

Although there is room to debate the precise details, Democrats wouldn't be considered favorites in any of the races they lost this spring. If anything, Democrats did better in these special elections than would have been expected, based on previous election results and even supposing that the national political environment was as hostile for Republicans as it was in 2006. That's even true in Georgia's Sixth, where Mitt Romney and the outgoing representative (Tom Price) won by 23 points, even though President Trump won by just 1.5 points.

Democratic strength is not surprising, since all of the ingredients for a strong Democratic performance are in place. The president's party just about always loses seats in the midterm elections, and it generally gets clobbered when the president's approval rating is beneath 50 percent, much less beneath 40.

But alone, a strong national political environment doesn't guarantee Democratic control of the House.

The Democrats just don't have many top-tier opportunities to win Republican-held seats. This year, just 11 Republicans represent seats with a Democratic tilt in recent presidential elections. Back in 2010, the Republicans had 73 such opportunities.

The election in 2006 is a particularly relevant example, because Democrats had a somewhat similar, if better, set of opportunities. Those chances yielded 31 seats, just a few more than the 24 seats they need in 2018. But Democrats also had some good luck in 2006 that will be hard to duplicate: There were a half dozen safely

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Republican districts where the incumbent succumbed to scandal or indictment, including Tom DeLay, a House majority leader.

The Republicans have a real shot to retain control of the House in a political climate that would doom them under typical circumstances. There are a lot of reasons for this structural G.O.P. advantage, like partisan gerrymandering, the inefficient distribution of Democrats in heavily Democratic cities, and the benefit of incumbency.

To retake the House, Democrats will ultimately need to carry seats with a clear Republican tradition. This year's special elections, including Jon Ossoff's loss to Karen Handel in Georgia, are a reminder that it will indeed be difficult for Democrats to win in Republican-leaning districts, just as it was for the Democrats in 2006 or for Republicans on Democratic-leaning turf in 2010.

The good news for Democrats is that [they don't need to win](#) all of these Republican-leaning districts or even most of them. Democrats might only need to win, say, 17 of the 60 seats where Republicans are favored, but where Democrats have a realistic chance.

In that sense, these Democratic losses are entirely consistent with the possibility of a House takeover. If Democrats keep running ahead of expectations across those plausibly competitive Republican-held seats, many seats will ultimately fall their way. But they will certainly lose more than they win. The question is whether they win enough, and no special election offers the answer to that.

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Correction: June 21, 2017, Wednesday

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: An earlier version of this article misstated the position of Tom DeLay in the 2006 election cycle. He was a House majority leader, not House Speaker.

PHOTO: At an election night party for Jon Ossoff, who on Tuesday lost his race for the U.S. House seat in Georgia's Sixth District. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIK S. LESSER/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY)

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